

Reached By The Real: What Can We *Know* From Religious and Spiritual Experiencing?

Mark Fox

Introduction

I have a friend – once a work colleague – who is afraid of going to Hell. We talk about it often: face to face, by text, and via e-mail. He has a religious faith and is an honest and intelligent man and his fear is a recurrent *motif* within our friendship. I understand his fear and I was reminded of it recently during a very sad conversation with my father. He is 89 and last year had a pacemaker implanted which has done only a little to reverse his progressive heart failure. Just a few weeks ago he had a cataract operation, but because of his age there were complications. Until relatively recently a fit and active man, my dad a short while ago sat in my living room and sobbed, telling me that he doesn't want to die but knowing that he will. Yet nearly all of his friends have died and sometimes *he* talks about wanting to go as well. But where to? And to what? It seems – at times – as if at least part of him wants to die but all of him is afraid of it, all of the time. (Does that make sense?) And his mind is completely unaffected by his condition and, like my friend, he is honestly facing his fears. There seems to me to be something very sane – very *real* – about all of this.

Knowing and Learning

One of the things that my friend and my father both *fear* is the unknown: a fear that we all share, just as we all share in the fact that we will die. What my friend and my father both have *in common* is their honesty in facing up to this fact, and I respect them both very much for that. And I have searched myself for something to say to them, and to the many hundreds and thousands like them, not to allay their fears – I don't think that is really possible – but to put them into some kind of context. And that is a big part of my aim in this talk to you today.

You'll see from the programme that I've given this talk what might seem to some to be a rather odd title – or at least *subtitle*: what can we *know* from religious and spiritual experiencing? Why not call it 'what can we *learn* from religious and spiritual experiencing'? I did it this way partly because there's a difference between learning and knowing. I'm not a great fan of educational theory – God knows – but I think that the academics get it right when they say you can learn without knowing but not the other way round, and that knowing goes much deeper than learning. A student can learn how to pass an exam without really knowing much about what they've spent the last year studying, but it's rare to find a student who really knows their subject who hasn't at the same time learned a lot. If you want to get them to learn, you have to get them first to *know*: or at least to *want* to know. And knowing really does seem to go deeper – much deeper – than learning. In fact, there's a world of difference between the two: a difference which is fundamental to our understanding of religious experience, and my talk today will seek to explore this too.

What Can We *Know*?

When the chips are down, we actually *know* very little with any certainty. Most things are uncertain to a certain extent – some things massively so. We know, for example, that triangles must have three sides and that bachelors must be unmarried men. But these so-called analytic truths don't get us very far, and they fail to touch the important issues of life, let alone our fears. I know – at least I think I know - that the sun rose this morning but I cannot be as certain that it will do so again tomorrow, although I am very confident that it will because in my experience it always has.

But this is a far cry from *knowing* that it will, in some sense, rise again in my experience a second, an hour, or a day after my own death, and that I will actually enjoy its warmth. I really cannot know this with anything like the same degree of confidence, unless I radically modify the sense in which I use the word 'know'.

At the very least, however, we all accept that some things can be learned – and, moreover, *known* - through *experience*. Whatever else the Unitarian Society for Psychical Studies is all about, it is at least about *this*. I have here a copy of the last *Psychical Studies*: the society's journal, and I was delighted to speak here last year on the occasion of the society's fiftieth anniversary and to be asked to do so again this year. In fact, I joined the society shortly after I gave last year's talk, in no small part due to the many experiences that people shared with me afterwards: experiences that had shown them that there was more to life than the physical world that we all pass through *en route* from birth to death. And, in fact, this journal would be inconceivable without the experiences that it recounts of what people have shared: experiences which have in many cases radically changed what they once thought they knew; both about themselves and about reality itself.

Such experiences are very similar to hundreds of accounts that I have been exploring during the last fifteen years or so during extensive research in the archives of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC): accounts that are now online but which until recently were housed in the basement of the library at the University of Wales, Lampeter (now the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David). In what follows I will – as last year – be drawing deeply from that well, but attempting to ask very different questions by way of completely different testimonies.

So...keeping in mind what we have been thinking about, consider the following account:

I had an experience when I was a young woman of 22, married and living with my husband in America. It was not an uneventful period of my life in general, but on the day of this experience I was under no particular stress and cannot recall having any emotion at all, or at least nothing approaching an 'emotional state'. It was about mid-morning. I came from the kitchen into the bedroom, sat at my dressing table, opened a drawer and began to do something quite ordinary, I can't remember what, when I was suddenly overwhelmed by the presence of God. I was absolutely astounded. I hadn't known there was a God at all. Having rejected the Roman Catholicism of my childhood while still in my teens, I was pretty much an atheist or agnostic and had no interest in religion. I had no such thoughts at the time, however. I was just shattered, shaken to the roots of my being. My initial reaction was that man wasn't supposed to know this and I must surely be going to die, and I stumbled over to the bed, got in and pulled the bedclothes up over me like a terrified child; it wasn't an attempt to escape – which would have been ridiculous, as God was manifestly within me – it was more a gesture to hold together, absorb the shock and not actually shatter. This was not a vision; no lights, no voices, but a much more immediate and definite kind of perception, as it involves recognition and not just apprehension of something or someone. In other words, this was not the apprehension of some being of incredible power and beauty and majesty who-must-be-God, this was 'our God, awesome indeed in the majesty of His power...(4581).

Where do we start with this? Well, the account is typical of the many thousands housed in the archive. It is reasonably well-written; in places very well written. (Sometimes my students tell me that it's *too* well-written). The lady encounters – or is encountered by – an overwhelming presence which she is sure is not of this physical world. In fact, metaphorically-speaking, it nearly crushes her. "I was just shattered; shaken to the roots of

my being.” To be sure, she *learns* things, and she spends a lot of time telling us what she learned. But it goes way deeper than this. She *knows* things, too. “I hadn’t known there was a God at all”, she writes. But as a result of her experience she does.

Religious Experience and Academia

Academics sometimes struggle to accept these kinds of things at face value. For example: they point to the fact that subjects are nearly always alone when their experiences occur – as this lady was - and even when they are not, we almost invariably have to take a single subject’s word for what they experienced. All true, but when you consider that the Alister Hardy archive contains literally thousands of accounts which frequently contain strikingly similar details to those we have just heard it becomes clear that these events really are in an important sense *shared* after all. Such an assertion invites the response that of course they are shared because we all have brains that contain more-or-less identical neural ‘wiring’, and hence we would be expected to share the same or similar hallucinations. True again, but the problem here is that subjects do not consider them to be hallucinations, and often point to the overwhelming *reality* of what they have experienced: something that radiates through almost every word that we just heard in our opening account. The objection is often made at *this* point that hallucinations are just as real as ‘ordinary’ experience, and that a subjective sense of ‘real-ness’ should not be taken as any kind of guarantee of authenticity. Another good point, but one which fails to take into consideration the fact that such events are almost always life-changing, which sets them qualitatively apart from the odd – and often trivial – experiences that are hallucinatory. We will return to this later, but it is very much evident from our 22 year-old lady’s experience. In fact, she adds to her account as a kind of postscript the following words:

Later, I trained as a psychologist, obtaining a PhD in clinical psychology and later worked as an Associate Professor. For the last few years I have been in private practice. Nothing in my professional training or experience has ever made me doubt the reality of what I have tried to describe to you. I am as convinced now, at age 60, as I was during those astonished days immediately following the experience. Indeed, I am still astonished sometimes.

Although we don't have time to do it today, I invite you to compare, say, the sorts of experiences that the late Oliver Sacks wrote about so splendidly with the experience that we just heard. One of his last books, *Hallucinations*, was all about hallucinations and I commend it to you. But having read it, I think you may conclude that it is easy to spot the differences between the hallucinations he collected and the kind of experience with which this talk begun: easier still when you multiply these kinds of experiences by several hundred, which we are able to do thanks to the archive that Sir Alister established.

What Can We Know and What Kind of Knowing Is It?

Last year I spoke about the pattern that many experiences of transcendent love appear to share. This year I want to cast my net wider. But let's recall our aims before we proceed: what can we *know* through religious and spiritual experience. And what *kind* of knowing is it?

Some more examples of experiences may help us to answer these two, related questions.

The first was narrated 40 years after it occurred to a then 16 year-old girl. The subject begins by describing a country walk in the evening close to her village home. Neither happy nor sad nor apparently looking for anything, she describes wearing a summer dress and sandals, and pausing near a wood to look at a cornfield by the light of the setting sun. Next comes the experience. She writes:

Then...there must be a blank. I will never know for how long, because I was only in my normal conscious mind with normal faculties as I came out of it. Everywhere surrounding me was this white, bright, sparkling light, like sun on frosty snow, like a million diamonds, and there was no cornfield, no trees, no sky, this light was everywhere; my ordinary eyes were open, but I was not seeing with them. It can only have lasted a moment I think or I would have fallen over.

The feeling was indescribable, but I have never experienced anything in the years that followed that I can compare with that glorious moment; it was blissful, uplifting, I felt open-mouthed wonder.

Then the tops of the trees became visible once again, then a piece of sky and gradually the *light* was no more, and the cornfield was spread before me. I stood there for a long time, trying in vain for *it* to come back and have tried many times since, but I only saw it once; but I know in my heart it is still there – and here – and everywhere around us. I know *Heaven* is within us and around us. I have had this wonderful experience which brought happiness beyond compare.

We see God in the miracle of life, in trees, flowers and birds – I smile when I hear talk of God as a man, wrathful or otherwise – I know I have seen and felt and am humbly grateful for the inner rock to which I cling.

And then she adds, almost as an afterthought: “I wrote it down, but I never told anybody.”

Into The Mystic

This is in many ways as remarkable as the experience we started with, albeit for different reasons. Like a mystic, she seems to have had temporary admittance to a wholly different reality, although she seems to have done nothing to bring it about. All at once the usual landscape of cornfield, trees and sky disappears, and something wholly other is disclosed.

Then it goes and gradually – but, apparently, not all at once – the original landscape reappears. And she wants her place of blissful, sparkling, light back, and stands there trying to get it back. But it won't come back. But even though she only saw it once she *knows*. She *knows* that even though she can't see it it's still there: within and around us. In fact, this knowledge makes what she hears tell of God as a man rather comical to her. She *knows* differently because of what she's experienced: even if it *did* only happen once.

This vivid quality of knowing is brilliantly described in the following account. Unusually, the subject does not give his age and there is no clue in the narrative as to when or where his experience occurred. But what is striking is the extreme effort he makes to describe the quality of knowing that accompanied it. He writes:

Suddenly everything became crystal clear, clearer, more definite, than anything in normal existence. There was also an amazing 'knowingness' rather than 'knowledgeableness': that is, I knew, not by application to study, but because it was in my mind from the beginning and had so existed as an attribute, a primary possession. There was no 'I think', 'I understand', 'I believe', 'I reason', but simply I KNOW. I knew that I was capable of answering any question or problem put to me, no matter how abstruse...(189)

What an extraordinary experience! In fact, we could scarcely wish for a more vivid description of the unusual sort of knowing that is so typical of religious experiencing. And it is notable that our subject makes clear what sort of quality of knowing he experienced by contrasting it with what it *wasn't*. *Not* thinking, *not* understanding, *not* believing, *not* reasoning. It is impossible to say whether at the time he attempted to describe his experience he had any knowledge of the struggles that mystics have historically had in articulating *their* experiences, but following them – as he does – along the *via negativa*, he arrives finally at the simple expression I KNOW, which in his written account he capitalises. And note, not even I KNEW: but I KNOW, a quality of knowing that was as immediate to him as it was possible to be.

Certainly, this remarkably vivid narration reveals its author struggling to put what he experienced into words and we are fortunate that he does so well. My own ongoing research in the archive has certainly shown me time and again how language is usually entirely inadequate to describe the depth of knowing that such experiences bring. In my first major study of archival experiences – *Lightforms* – I was confronted with this over and

over again. In the following account – taken from that study – the author uses a brilliant expression to denote the uselessness of language to convey what she experienced. Reading one evening in her flat, being clear to point out that she had dined but not wined, the subject describes how “I suddenly began to have what I can best describe as a great upsurge of feeling, which made me put my book down and listen very intently.” Feeling an unusual brightness and elation, she then experiences what she can only describe as “a very fast flowing current, or stream of light, way out above me and beneath that a second stream narrower, but flowing in the same direction, with a gap between them. It seemed that I then cognized that this lower and smaller current somehow, symbolically represented my own life stream.”

Reflecting on this highly unusual experience, she later writes:

It is very difficult, practically impossible, to describe such a unique and physical experience. All I knew [was] it was a gripping reality (words scratch). All the time there was this great intensification of light and energy and outline of objects in the room, and this wonderful feeling that I had somehow become part of everything, and attached to something. At the same time I realized that strength and understanding were being given to me together with this new direction I seemed to be flowing in.

‘Words scratch’! It is a delightfully brief yet evocative admission of the insufficiency of language to convey the sheer oddity – the differentness and depth - of what was experienced. As with our other accounts, a reality is temporarily revealed, and a depth of knowing with it, that words simply cannot describe.

Why Won’t Language *Do*?

But why *is* it that words scratch so often in religious experiencing? Why won’t language *do*?

It is worth noting that in his study of the first 3000 accounts in the RERC archive, *The*

Spiritual Nature of Man, published in 1979, Alister Hardy briefly cited Philosopher of Science Michael Polanyi and the distinction that he had drawn some years before between *tacit* and *explicit* knowledge. It is an old distinction now, and Hardy didn't develop it at the time, but perhaps we might. Basically, Polanyi's contention – set out in the 1950s and 60s – was that, to quote him, “we can know more than we can tell.” This knowing-that-exists-beyond telling Polanyi referred to as *tacit* knowledge, or tacit knowing. It is pre-logical, he wrote, and is more akin to informed guesses, hunches and imaginings than to anything that can be grasped by the discursive intellect. In his writing, he referred to the opposite of this kind of knowledge as *explicit* knowledge. This very different kind of knowledge is the kind of knowledge that language does very well with. In fact he refers to explicit knowledge as the kind of knowledge that can be articulated, codified, accessed, and verbalised, and hence easily transmitted to others.

Clearly, the knowing-experiences we have been considering so far in this talk fall into the tacit category. But does this *tacit knowing-explicit knowing* distinction really get us anywhere? I'm not sure that Hardy thought it did, which is why he simply flagged it up without pursuing it. But times have changed. We are now heirs to a school of thought in the study of religious experience known as *constructivism*; a school of thought that didn't exist in Hardy's day. It is a broadly philosophical position, and it seeks to show that religious experiences are not just shaped but actually *caused* by language. This, it is asserted, is why, say, the experiences of Jewish mystics are different to those of Islamic mystics. Both groups possess different language-shaped expectations and this *causes* them to have the very different experiences that they do, in fact, have. Thus, constructivists such as Stephen Katz, George Lindbeck and our very own Don Cupitt argue that the religious experiences undergone by members of different traditions are different because they are created by the

teachings of those traditions; themselves codified in language. So language creates expectation that creates experience; and thus the differing languages of different religious traditions create the experiences that differ between those traditions. Hence, for example, while Jewish mystics never report becoming one with God Islamic mystics frequently do.

My own discoveries over the years have brought me into radical disagreement with this position. It simply doesn't understand religious experience. It somehow makes the mistake of thinking that language causes or creates such experience when, in fact, language is confounded by such experience. Words don't create here, as we have seen. They scratch – and then barely, and often not at all. In fact, I suspect that proponents of constructivism haven't spent much time reading religious experiences. If they had, they wouldn't make such an elementary blunder; one akin, in a sense, to thinking that tacit knowledge is, in fact, explicit knowledge. It's that basic.

What we have seen is that the knowing that accompanies religious experiencing is one which opens up a *fissure* in language. But where does the fissure exist? Is it in the ability – or, rather, inability - to convey what is revealed? Or is it, somehow, inherent in *what* is revealed? Or both? In this context, we may consider the following account, and try to draw our own conclusions – if we can:

I cannot say how long it took to develop, but the ecstasy lasted over roughly three weeks. The main sensation was of being loved, a flood of sweetness of great strength, without any element of sentimentality or anything but itself. The description is quite inadequate. I also felt a unification of myself with the external world: I did not lose my own identity, yet all things and I somehow entered into each other; all things seemed to speak to me. Something was communicated to me, not in words or images, but in another form of knowing. (793)

This brief digression concerning religious experience and language is, of course, of very little help to my dad and my friend. As interesting as it might be, it doesn't still their fears or bring them any comfort: particularly in the face of death. And yet there are very many experiences contained in the RERC archive that might well be said to do just that.

It's been twenty years now since I worked in the RERC archive as part of my main job. Those were the days when it was located at Westminster College, Oxford, under the directorship of Peggy Morgan. Back in those days the archive was just being computerised, and the then secretary Diana Hasting did a lot towards adding the accounts to a computer database for the very first time. I remember that Diana was sometimes in tears, so moving were some of the experiences she was reading and adding to the then-fledgling database. The following, very brief, account, has always had a similar effect on me. The subject writes:

My daughter Joan was killed by a car when she was 7 years old. She and I were very close and I was grief-stricken. She was lying in her coffin in her bedroom. I fell on my knees by the bedside. Suddenly I felt as if something a bit behind me was consolidating itself. Then I felt a touch on my shoulder lasting only an instant, and I knew there was another world.

As moving as this account surely is, we note again the oddity of the language – “something a bit behind me was *consolidating* itself” – and the strength of knowing: “I knew that there was another world.” (165) Compare this next account:

Then something very strange and wonderful happened, something that stays with me to this day. I felt pressure as if someone were touching me. There definitely was pressure on my right side. I felt lifted up. My whole being was filled with ecstasy...All cares were taken away...nothing of this world mattered. I knew there was another. (55)

There is more hope and comfort to be had here, in experiences like these: and knowing too.

And then there are Near-Death Experiences. 2015 marked the fortieth anniversary of the term 'Near-Death Experience': a term which was coined by Raymond Moody in his 1975

best-seller *Life After Life*. The RERC archive contains a great many Near-Death Experiences, and it is interesting to note how many of them contain the *motif* of knowing with which we have been concerned. The first – a short account – simply says:

At the age of twelve, I was quite ill in bed, I found myself floating up from my body into a ray of sunshine. At the time I thought quite consciously that I was dying, and I remember that the feeling of liberation was joyful beyond anything I have ever known. I didn't die, of course, but returned quite gently to my body. From that time on I've never been afraid of death. (802)

A slightly longer account contains the same *motif*:

The ultimate proof to me of life after death and the love of God came just after the birth of my daughter.

It had been a long and difficult birth and I was very exhausted. As nurse helped me to sit up, I remember saying 'I do feel funny'. Everything whirled and blackness formed a tunnel, a long, long tunnel with an opening at the other end which glowed with a bright light.

Down, down into the whirling blackness. It seemed a long time before I reached the opening and found myself floating gently in a soft warm mist, all golden as with sunlight, soft music and a feeling of complete happiness, and such peace that passes all understanding was mine; faces came out of the mist, smiled and faded away.

I seemed to be fully conscious and knowing that I had 'died' yet I lived. God's plan of good death had no sting.

Then came the remembrance of the baby – who would look after her if I stayed?

My next reaction was to pain: my face stung as the doctor slapped first one side, then the other – hard.

As I opened my eyes he greeted me with 'You naughty girl, you've given me the biggest fright of my life.' He looked startled when I answered, 'Don't begrudge me that: it was absolutely wonderful.'

I still feel very grateful and humble for this experience, certainly have no fear of death, knowing it is as simple as walking from one room to another. (2733)

Near-Death Experiences and Constructivism

Although there seems to be something of a 'sea change' afoot, there is still a general reluctance on the part of many academics to grapple seriously with Near-Death Experiences. One typical objection is that the knowledge of such things is now so widespread that either expectation is 'creating' such experiences – it is never specified how – or that conscious or unconscious fabrication is to blame. In other words, slight variants on the old constructivist argument that we've already considered. And it is to be admitted that now *forty-one* years after Moody coined it, the term 'Near-Death Experience' now seems to pop up everywhere. It is worth bearing in mind, therefore, that there are many accounts in the archive that once again cause problems for the view that such experiences are somehow made of language and are thus shaped by expectation. This is because they relate experiences very similar to Near-Death Experiences that both occurred before Near-Death Experiences were widely known about – before, even, the phrase was coined – but also – and more importantly - *were actually written down and sent to Hardy* before such widespread knowledge existed. I devoted a chapter to such accounts in *Lightforms* and the following account – sent to Hardy on 20th September 1971 - is representative:

After a month of what I call 'unmitigated hell' one day (January 10, 1970), early in the morning, I was sure that I was going to be able to die. During this period I had been sitting up nearly 24 hours each day because of excruciating pain, and then came the day when I could not even sit up straight. So, in a chair, with my left elbow on my knee and my head on my hand, I closed my eyes and I immediately left this earth.

All around me was a soft white light and I felt the presence of someone beside me, on my left and a little in back. So, I did not see, but I thought that God was walking along with me. We were going forward, slowly and steadily, getting closer and nearer with every step, and I kept talking to Him. I was so happy. Real happiness, not of this earth where people and material things are involved. Just pure happiness. Then, all of a sudden, we stopped, and I did not want to stop. So I pleaded, 'I have such a short distance to go. Only a few steps more.' I could almost see where I was going, but this was indistinct and I cannot describe it. And then I experienced the most wonderful feeling of peace. Not just quietness or serenity,

but perfect peace. I immediately thought 'Perhaps this is it' and I hurried to thank God before I died. Of course, I did not know if this feeling of peace would continue. I might just go to sleep. I did not know what it would be like, but I was sure that it was going to be marvellous – so very marvellous.

And then a noise brought me back. I opened my eyes and was so disgusted to discover that there I was. The biggest disappointment of my life (1792).

Negative Spiritual Experiences

Whenever I put together a talk like this I always learn new things. As I was getting my notes together for today's talk my eyes happened upon a very little booklet that I hadn't looked at for quite a while. Entitled *Negative Spiritual Experiences*, it was written by a Danish researcher, Merete Demant Jakobsen and based on research she conducted in the RERC archive in the late 1990s. She had been interested in whether or not anybody had sent any experiences of evil to Sir Alister, and she turned up approximately 140 accounts and made them the basis for a very interesting – if at times, rather disconcerting – read. Re-reading it in the light of what I planned to talk about today I was struck by how such experiences almost never contained the motif of knowing that we've been considering. Consider the following account, from a subject who was on a train and who had just been enjoying a journey with her aunt:

I was in a pleasant relaxed frame of mind – my mind idle – my eyes shut when I suddenly 'assaulted' by a sense of Evil. I opened my eyes to see if anyone had entered the compartment of the train but it was empty but for a middle aged man who seemed to be in a corner diagonally opposite and for a pleasant looking girl who sat opposite. I was filled with an indescribable feeling of mental revulsion and horror, but my mind seemed to work like that of a threatened animal as I tried to sense from where the threat came. I felt as if my mind was being threatened by some destructive force and thought it might be associated with the people or the compartment and determined to leave the train some three stations before I should normally leave and either get [another] train or walk. I left the train and was aware that the evil was with me. I felt I couldn't combat it, then argued that I couldn't recoil so completely if it were part of me and that I must pray for help. (1476)

In many ways this is rather typical. Whilst many such negative experiences seem dominated by descriptions of power, negativity, malignity, evil, oppression, terror and force – and Jakobsen brings this out very clearly – it is interesting that the element of knowing is more-or-less entirely absent. Perhaps it doesn't need to be present, given the force of the other impressions. Perhaps subjects just view it as a 'given'. But this finding as regards the language that Hardy's correspondents both use and don't use seems to me to be an interesting one: reinforcing a suspicion that a study of the frequency of certain descriptors across a range of religious and spiritual experiences would be a huge but at the same time very useful undertaking.

Transformed By The Real

I can't remember if I mentioned this to you last year or not but for some years, now, I have been using the sorts of accounts I've shared with you today – the most recent one excepted - in talks and sermons that I have given in churches. The response has been, shall we say, 'mixed', and this has always struck me as odd, given that the Christian faith is rooted in experience: experience that was trusted as a reliable source of knowledge from the very beginning. The early disciples experienced the risen Jesus, for example, and Paul was able to say to the church at Corinth that "I resolved to *know* nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" - something that would have been inconceivable apart from his own (partly shared) experience on the road to Damascus.

Like Paul after his own experience, many of Alister Hardy's correspondents appear to have been profoundly transformed by what happened to them. I strongly suspect that this, too, is indicative of the fact that they *knew* things – and didn't simply learn things – either during or as a result of their experiences. I was very interested in this motif of transformation

during my research for *Lightforms* and as I approach the end of this talk I offer one, final, account, that seems to make clear how a sudden, new, depth and quality of knowing leads to a transformed sense of being. The lady is clearly a Christian, and her use of 'born again' language seems particularly apt to describe the extent of transformation that she experienced. She tells us of the aftereffects of a vision of light she had, that:

Although the freshness of the vision has faded, it is clear that my life is quite different as a result. Only positive things are of any significance to me, negative thoughts and actions (whether 'true' or not) give pain, whether relating to myself or not. This is somehow bound up with the unification of myself with the world, 'I' am a different 'I', partly again overlaid with selfish desires, yet with 'self' still extended in some way to include external things, in whose well-being or otherwise I actually participate. Before the experience I had read the New Testament, or heard it read rather, and received no lasting impression: after the experience I recognised it as a reflection of my new self, the way in which I now thought, and of Christ's enlightenment as being of the same essential nature (perhaps of different degree) to my own. The real point is that this is not a matter of adopting a set of intellectual precepts, but of becoming simply a different person in essential nature, of being 'born again', as if a deep well had opened up within the depths of the self, and within this depth and in the external world a 'something' is encountered with which a personal relationship is established, and this is based not upon thought, although the intellect is satisfied, but upon emotion or love, as a child reacts to a parent. (793)

My friend's fears and my father's tears have convinced me that there has never been a more important time to ask the question: what *can* we know from religious experience? To borrow a term from the Churches Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies: there has never been a greater or more urgent need to join knowledge to faith; and, in particular, a knowledge grounded in experience. And most people are empiricists at heart, whether they have any kind of faith or not. Whatever else *this* organisation is, represented here today, it is surely a 'safe space' for the sharing and exploring of religious and spiritual experience – safe because it is rooted in a faith grounded in love and a knowledge that there is more to life than this. Perhaps if the evidence for worlds beyond this one and the goodness of God

was more widely known, my friend would find his fears stilled and my father would find some solace, even in the midst of his tears.